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ABSTRACT

Counseling psychologists have yet to study the counseling needs of transracially adopted children. The intent of this paper is to present a model that increases understanding of possible adaptations of transracial adoptees. Race and culture of adoptees, parents, and that reflected within the community in which the family resides are all highlighted as critical in conceptualizing the unique needs and experiences that transracial adoptees may bring to counseling. The model proposes that transracial adoptees' cultural identities are composed of both racial group cultural identity and the cultural identity of their parents, and that transracial adoptees' racial identities are composed of a combination of their own racial identity and that of their adoptive parents. In addition, an individual may have a unique cultural adaptation that is qualitatively different from that of the parents and the racial group. The model as diagrammed has two axes, a cultural identity axis and a racial identity axis. Future research might address the psychological adjustment and sense of well-being of transracial adoptees across all cells of this model. (Contains 3 figures and 39 references.) (Author/SLD)

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The Cultural-Racial Identity Model: Understanding the Racial Identity and Cultural Identity Development of Transracial Adoptees

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Abstract

The intent of this paper is to present a model that increases understanding of possible adaptations of transracial adoptees. Race and culture of adoptees, parents, and that reflected within the surrounding community within which the family resides, are all highlighted as critical in conceptualizing the unique needs and experiences that transracial adoptees may bring to counseling.

The Cultural-Racial Identity Model:

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Adoption, as it was traditionally practiced, was a way for married couples who were unable to have children to start a family. Typically, White couples wanted to adopt healthy White babies. After World War II, many European children had survived the war but their families had not. In order to accommodate these children, adoption practices were expanded to include inter-country adoptions. The Korean war also resulted in children needing families, so the first intercountry-transracial adoptions began to take place. By the 1960s, transracial adoptions within the United States became a fairly common phenomenon. White couples began to consider American racial minority children for adoption as well.

Since that time, and even as long ago as the 1950s, the implications and effects of transracial adoption have been examined. In fact, the existing research regarding transracially adopted children and adolescents have been conducted primarily by those in the social work and child development fields. The self-esteem, adjustment, intelligence, and racial identity of transracial adoptees have been studied and compared to that of intraracial adoptees.

However, counseling psychologists have yet to study the counseling needs of transracially adopted children. Perhaps it has been assumed that the needs of transracial adoptees are similar to the needs of traditionally, or intraracially, adopted children. To endorse this assumption, however, a crucial factor in development and adjustment is ignored: racial and cultural identity development of transracial adoptees. In the case of transracial adoptees, the racial group

membership of the adoptees differs from their adoptive parents' racial group membership and in some instances, the culture of the adoptee also differs (i.e., as in intercountry adoptions). These differences have been expected by some to have a differential and potentially negative effect on transracial adoptees--an effect that children adopted intraracially do not experience. It has been hypothesized that transracially adopted minority children by White couples, not being prepared to effectively manage the issues of racism within the larger society, will subsequently be harmed emotionally. Others, however, purport that transracial adoptees' experiences will be no different from that involved in intraracial adoptions. A few of these even suggest that transracial adoption is one critical tool that will facilitate the development of increased racial harmony within this country. Still yet, there continues to remain some in the general society and within academic settings and the helping professionals who purport that regardless of the circumstances, there should be no mixing among the races in order to insure racial purity. These three perspectives continue to fuel the controversy that currently surrounds the topic of transracial adoption.

Addressing the controversy through research

Practicing social workers, leaders of minority group communities, and scholars examining the effects of transracial adoption on adoptees, are currently the primary contributors to policy development and service delivery to adults considering transracial adoption (Chimezie, 1975; Hayes, 1993). In order to determine the influence that transracial adoption has on adoptees, studies were conducted that investigated the racial identity of transracial adoptees (Bagley, 1993; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Johnson, Shireman, & Watson, 1987; McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982, 1984; Simon & Alstein, 1987). However, all of these studies

actually examined the racial group preferences and objective racial self-identification of transracial adoptees rather than their racial identity development. These studies conceptualized racial identity as being the racial group (e.g., Black, White, Korean, Native American, etc.) to which the adoptees feel that they belong. This conceptualization of racial identity appears to be based on the acknowledgment or recognition of racial group membership rather than on feelings or attitudes toward one's racial group. Theories about attitudes and feelings that individuals have toward their own racial group and toward the dominant racial group were developed in the early 1970s (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Cross, 1971, 1978). These theories have resulted in a theory of racial identity development for minority groups.

Before the theories on racial identity development are examined, the conceptualization of racial identity that has been used in previous studies should be reviewed. In order to further analyze the relationship between racial identity development (i.e., the progression of different attitudes about one's own racial group and about the dominant racial group) and racial group preferences/objective racial self-identification, the literature on racial preferences (i.e., this was called racial identity by previous researchers) will be reviewed and the findings interpreted.

Johnson et al. (1987) found that transracially adopted Black children had greater awareness of their race and greater preference toward dolls of their own race at an earlier age than do intraracially adopted Black children, but at an older age, both groups of adopted children were at the same level of awareness and preference. Results also indicated that transracially adopted children's awareness and preference did not increase as rapidly as did the intraracially adopted children's. They concluded from this finding that the transracially adopted children were

developing differently from intraracially adopted children, and that this developmental difference may be a precursor to problems in the transracial adoptees' racial identity.

McRoy et al. (1982) examined both the self-esteem and racial identity of transracial adoptees. They found no differences between self-esteem of transracially and intraracially adopted Back children. However, significant differences in the quality and quantity of transracial adoptees' references to their racial background and their adoption status were found. Transracial adoptees tended to identify themselves by using racial self-referents and by referring to themselves as being adopted more often than did intraracial adoptees. Interview data indicated that transracial adoptees who lived in racially integrated communities, attended integrated schools, and whose parents "accepted their child's black racial identity" (p. 525) tended to have more positive feelings about their racial group membership than those transracial adoptees who had little contact with people of their racial group and whose parents de-emphasized the adoptees' racial identity.

Zastrow (1977) also found that transracial adoption was not detrimental to the adoptee and that the outcomes of transracial placements were as 'successful' as intraracial placements" (p. 86). Bagley (1994) studied transracial adoptees in Britain and found that the adjustment and identity of transracial adoptees were "generally excellent" (p. 285) and that the percentage of adoptees described as being poorly adjusted or having identity problems among transracial adoptees was approximately the same among intraracial adoptees. Similarly, in a study of attachment styles, Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, and Waters (1985) found significant differences between transracial and intraracial adoptees.

These findings indicate that transracial adoptees' racial group preferences often depend on the areas in which they live (integrated vs. predominantly White), the schools that they attend (integrated vs. predominantly White), and the attitudes of their parents toward the adoptees' racial group membership. The literature also suggests that regardless of their racial group preferences or racial self-identification, transracial adoptees' self-esteem and adjustment tend to be on par with that of intraracial adoptees. Although these findings can serve to influence legislators, social work agencies, and the public, they do little to aid in understanding the unique experience of transracial adoptees. Counseling psychologists must be prepared to recognize the needs of transracial adoptees, particularly as these needs differ from the needs of both intraracial adoptees and the general population. For this reason, scientist-practitioners should begin to examine theoretical, counseling, and therapeutic implications that may be associated with being transracially adopted. Drawing upon the multicultural counseling literature for constructs to add clarity to the literature addressing the needs of transracial adoptees would seem important.

Distinguishing Among Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

The first step toward understanding the needs of transracial adoptees has been delineated by those examining these issues in the past (e.g., social workers, child development specialists, etc.). These researchers typically suggest that racial identity development of transracial adoptees is the pivotal point in clarifying the effects that transracial adoption has on both adoptees and the adoptive families. However, transracial adoption entails more than just racial differences; it involves ethnic and cultural differences as well. Phinney (1992) responded to the need to distinguish between race and culture by developing a model of ethnic identity.

Ethnic identity is described as "that part of an individual's self-concept that derives from his or her knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Phinney, 1992, p. 156). Some of the components of ethnic identity include self-identification, language, social networks, religious affiliation, and cultural traditions and practices. Ethnic identity development, as conceptualized by Phinney (1989), is similar to Black racial identity development (Cross, 1971, 1978) and Minority Identity Development (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989) in that they all seek to describe the process of conversion or development through which African Americans and other minority groups are thought to progress. All three of the theoretical models proposed share the premise that non-White individuals possess attitudes and feelings about their own racial group membership and the ways in which that membership interacts with the dominant racial group (i.e., Whites). These attitudes change and develop as individuals are confronted with "startling experiences that shatter[s] previous assumptions" (Sabnani & Ponterotto, 1992, p. 176), feelings of anger, feelings of guilt, or eventually feelings of security. The dissonance of the experiences and feelings stimulate the individual to progress through developmental stages. Stages reflect individuals' feelings about one's own race and about the dominant race.

In an effort to create a bridge linking racial group preferences or objective racial self-identification, racial identity, and cultural identity, the intent of this paper is to present a conceptual model in which: 1) transracial adoptees' cultural identities are composed of both racial group cultural identity and the cultural identity of their parents; and, 2) transracial adoptees' racial identities are composed of a combination of their own racial identity and the racial identity of their

parents. This model was developed in response to a need for greater distinctions between culture and race and to acknowledge possible interactions between the two. As has been noted in the previous literature, individuals of the same race may be from different cultures; and, in contrast, individuals of different races may share cultures.

One of the concerns voiced by those opposing transracial adoption has been that transracial adoptees may share the culture of their parents rather than the culture of their racial group (Chimezie, 1975; Hayes, 1993). Thus, African American children adopted by European American families may prefer and identify moreso with a European American cultural norm. Such an adaptation may result in children rejecting members of their own racial group. The model proposed herein was designed to clarify the distinctions between culture and race, to identify the contributors to individuals' cultural and racial identity, and to aid in understanding the possible combinations of culture and race.

In order to describe "cultural identity," the term "culture" must be defined. Culture refers to ". . . the configuration of learned behavior and results of behavior whose components and elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society" (cited in Atkinson et al., 1993, p. 5). Considering this definition, an individual's cultural identity is determined by the "particular society" to which the individual belongs. The society's behaviors, beliefs, rituals, values, etc. contribute to defining that culture. Although environmental influences may affect the culture of individuals, children tend to possess some aspects of the culture of their parents and families, particularly when the parents and children are of the same racial group. When children and parents are from the same racial or ethnic group, cultural differences tend to be due to

generational differences (i.e., differences in age, societal standards, technology, etc.). The cultural differences between parents and transracial adoptees, however, have yet to be studied or delineated. The purpose of the Cultural-Racial Identity Model is to account for instances in which racial and ethnic differences between parents and adopted children affect the cultural identity of the adoptees.

For example, the culture of African Americans includes various sets of beliefs and values that may be unique to that culture, and individuals may subscribe to African American culture by endorsing those values, beliefs, behaviors, etc. and by appreciating their affiliation with that racial and ethnic group. Transracial adoptees may have an unusual cultural experience in that they may be raised in a culture that is different from the culture of other people of their racial group. This is also perceived by some as a culture that might not adequately prepare them to function effectively within the context of a larger society.

In this model, transracial adoptees can develop their cultural identity from several sources:. adopted parents; the traditional culture of their racial group; and, individual's unique cultural adaptation that is qualitatively different from the culture of both parents and their racial group. This third source of cultural identity may be a product of the cultures of their parents and their racial group or one which significantly differs from both

It is assumed that transracial adoptees' cultural and racial identity regardless of the source, is influenced by environmental factors within and without the surrounding community of the family. Consequently, transracial adoptees' adaptation is altered and shaped by reinforcers in the

immediate life setting, culture of social peer group, and societal changes in acceptable moral and values, technology, and political trends.

In addition, transracial adoptees' experience and cultural adaptation may also be affected by the degree to which they are 'visually different' from adopted parents. Children are 'visually different' when physical appearance (e.g., skin color, facial features, hair color, etc.) obviously differs from the physical appearance of parents. The degree to which transracial adoptees are 'visually different' from their parents should significantly influence the process of culture and racial identity development. Considering both the impact of culture and race would appear to be critical in understanding the unique experiences, challenges, and needs of transracial adoptees.

The Cultural-Racial Identity Model

The Cultural-Racial Identity Model integrates both culture and race in an attempt to better understand the experiences of transracial adoptees. The intent of the model is to extend the conceptualization of adoptees' experience beyond the dichotomous perspectives that currently fuel the controversy around transracial adoption. The adaptation alternatives and related issues involved in transracial adopted families may be much more complex than that presented by both sides of the argument. The objective of the following is the presentation of a model that describes a more comprehensive means of addressing race, culture, and unique interactions between the two in the identity development of transracial adoptees.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The Cultural-Racial Identity Model has two axes, a cultural identity axis and a racial identity axis. Each of the two axes contains four quadrants that describe the degree to which transracial adoptees identify with the culture and race of both their racial group and that of their parents. The primary axis in the model is the Cultural Identity Axis. Adoptees' cultural identities are presented as a function of the culture of adoptees' parents (parental culture) and the culture of adoptees' racial group (racial group culture) (see Figure 1). Individuals can be high or low in either source of cultural identity. The quadrant into which each group falls depends on the degree to which individuals' obtain their cultural identity from each source.

The secondary axis of the model is composed of sources of racial identity for adoptees. The Racial Identity Axis incorporates the race of the transracial adoptee (race of self) and the race of the adoptees' parents (race of parents) into the model (see Figure 2). With the incorporation of both the Cultural Identity Axis and the Racial Identity Axis, the model contains 16 cells. Those cells consist of all of the combinations made possible by use of both axes. As shown in Figure 3, each of the cultural identity quadrants from the Cultural Identity Axis can be paired with any of the racial identity quadrants from the Racial Identity Axis.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Criteria to determine with which cultures transracial adoptees identify consists of the components: knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort. Adoptees who are high on all of these components in a particular culture can be categorized as having that culture as their primary

culture. If they are comparably high on the culture traditionally associated with their race and that of adoptees parents, they will be considered to be Bicultural. Adoptees expressing high levels of knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort across several cultures beyond that of parents and that of their assigned racial or ethnic group, they are considered to be Culturally Undifferentiated.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Transracial adoptees with a Bicultural cultural identity possess a cultural identity that is made up of both that typically associated with their assigned racial groups' and that of their parents' cultures. At different times and in different situations, those with Bicultural identities will present the cultural identity that is most adaptive or that is most positively reinforced. They are comfortable with, aware of, knowledgeable of, and competent with the cultures of their own racial group and that of their parents. These individuals have developed a culture for themselves that is a combination of both their personal culture and their parents' cultures. For instance, if a Korean American transracial adoptee, adopted by European American parents, has a Bicultural Identity, the individual has maintained or learned through exposure, both Korean and European American cultures. Bicultural individuals may tend to grow up in communities in which they are able to maintain both cultures through exposure and parental encouragement.

Culture Specific Type I individuals are high on their racial group culture and low on parental culture. Transracial adoptees who fall into this category identify their culture as different

from their parents. They have either acquired or retained a cultural identity that is similar to the culture of their racial group. These individuals have knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort and a preference for interaction only with their racial group's culture. Although they may be high on knowledge, awareness, and competence for their parents' culture, they do not feel comfortable or prefer contact with members of that culture. For example, Culture Specific Type I African American children adopted by European American parents would identify and prefer African American cultural norms. This adaptation might occur when adopted parents have chosen to live within a setting that reflects the culture typically associated with the assigned racial group of their adopted child. However, it might also occur due to persisting negative experiences with attempts to fit into the culture represented by that of adopted parents.

When individuals are high on parental culture but low on racial group culture, they can be described by the Culture Specific Type II category. In this category, the cultural identity of the individuals' parents dominates. In this case, transracial adoptees assume the culture of their parents and discount that associated with their racial group. This may happen when the families live in communities that are exclusively dominated by the culture of their parents (e.g., predominantly European American communities and schools). These individuals would have a high level of knowledge, awareness, and competence only with the culture of their parents. Such adoptees may have experienced an overall positive reception by those of their parents' culture and few and/or negative experiences with others.

Culturally Undifferentiated transracial adoptees are low on both parental and racial group cultural sources. These individuals have a higher comfort level with more than two cultures.

Their cultural identity is a fusion of several cultures rather than just their racial group culture and/or their parents' culture. Their awareness, knowledge, competence, and comfort level with several cultures prohibits them from differentiating between the cultures with which they identify. For example, a Hispanic child adopted by an African American family may be culturally undifferentiated if the child is raised in an integrated community. This adoptee may have a high level of knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort with African American culture, Hispanic American culture, European American culture, and Asian American culture. Additionally, the adoptee may also have developed a culture that is a combination of all of these cultures and with none of the cultures as primary.

As noted above, one concern of opponents to transracial adoption is the potential for adoptees' discomfort with members of their own racial group. In an attempt to respond to that concern, the Racial Identity Axis describes the potential racial identities that the adoptees may endorse. Unlike the Cultural Identity Axis, comfort level is the main factor in determining the racial identity of the adoptees.

Individuals having a Biracial Identity identify with both the race of their parents and their own race. For this to occur, the adoptees must be: 1) young transracial adoptees from any racial group; 2) biracial adoptees (i.e., each biological parent is racially different from the other); and 3) visually similar to adopted parents (i.e., the adoptees are racially or ethnically different such as Hispanic or Native American or light skinned African Americans, but they resemble their adoptive European American parents in appearance). When transracial adoptees meet these criteria, the

possibility of a Biracial Identity is increased. These individuals recognize, acknowledge, and are comfortable with identifying themselves as being of two racial groups.

Those adoptees who objectively and accurately identify their race have Racially Specific Type I identities. They are comfortable with the concept of racial group membership. These adoptees recognize the objective fact of both their own and their parents' race and the implications of such group affiliation within the larger society..

On the other hand, some transracial adoptees may mistakenly identify their race. These individuals identify their race as that of their parents, when they are by the nature of their physical appearance obviously of another racial group. For instance, an African American adoptee, who would be perceived by most others as such based on physical characteristics, identifies as European American or White (the actual race of their adopted parents). Such individuals maintain a Racially Specific Type II identity. These individuals are uncomfortable with their racial group membership. This racial adaptation might result from a family's effort to increase cohesiveness and a sense of belonging by discounting physical differences and adhering to a "we're all the same" philosophy. This family's decision might have the potential of simultaneously resulting in a positive and negative outcome. The positive outcome would be a strong sense of family cohesiveness and heightened sense of belonging by the transracial adoptee. The negative outcome would be a denial of the meaning of physical differences in this country and potentially to a sense of self-hatred and minimization. This potential negative outcome among Racially Specific Type II individuals personify the concerns of opponents to transracial adoption.

Although this concern is valid, it has yet to be shown empirically that individuals who are transracially adopted have the racial identity described by this category. As noted in the literature reviewed above, transracial adoptees have tended to be as accurate if not more accurate in their racial self-identification (Johnson et al., 1987), however, there may be environments and family dynamics that foster this adaptation that have not been examined. In deference to these concerns and in an effort to construct a comprehensive model, this potential racial identity category has been included in the Cultural-Racial Identity Model.

The final identity that transracial adoptees may endorse is the Racially Undifferentiated Identity. These individuals identify themselves as having multiple racial group membership. They note all of the different races that apply to them and not just that indicated by their appearance or that of their parents. This racial identity also includes high comfort levels within multi-racial settings. They have a low level of identification with their parents' racial group as well as with their primary racial group and resist societal pressure to choose. For example, historically, individuals having any amount of African American ancestry have been objectively identified as African American. However, the Racially Undifferentiated adoptee who has Hispanic, Asian, and African ancestry and who self-identifies using all racial categories, has chosen to recognize all of his/her racial makeup rather than just the historically acceptable racial category of African American based on the one drop theory.

When the Cultural-Racial Identity Model is taken as a whole, transracial adoptees are identified by both a cultural identity category and a racial identity category. For example, individuals who are found to be Culturally Specific Type II may also be Racially Undifferentiated.

This occurs when transracial adoptees identify culturally with their parents and identify racially with multiple racial groups or as 'human'. Each cell of the model (n=16) is intended to characterize a unique "face" of transracial adoption with a unique set of experiences and related issues.

Implications for Understanding Bi-racial Status Individuals

The authors believe that the model may also have some relevance in the conceptualization of individuals with parents having different racial group status. Bi-racial children may choose a cultural and racial identity that reflects that of their: father, mother, both father and mother, or beyond that of both parents. Their adaptation, like that among transracial adoptees, may result from environmental influences that interact with both race and culture of parents in their identity development.

Conclusions

This model was inspired by the need to better understand the experiences of transracial adoptees, particularly in terms of their cultural and racial identities. It was also intended to serve as a guideline for examining those experiences, particularly those related to perspectives of proponents and opponents of transracial adoption. Future research might address the general psychological adjustment and sense of well-being of transracial adoptees across all cells of this model. Studies that examine family dynamics that tend to lead to each adaptation would assist in

understanding the critical issues that should be addressed by professionals counseling couples and families considering transracial adoption.

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Figure 1. The Cultural Identity Axis

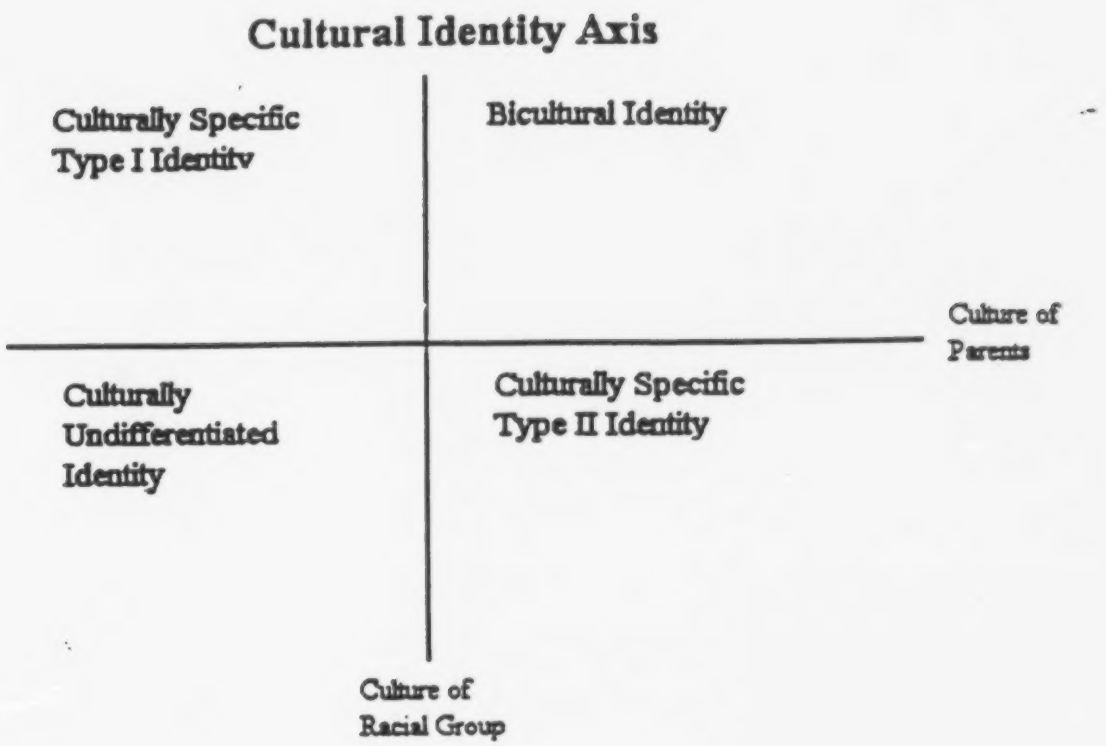

Figure 2. The Racial Identity Axis

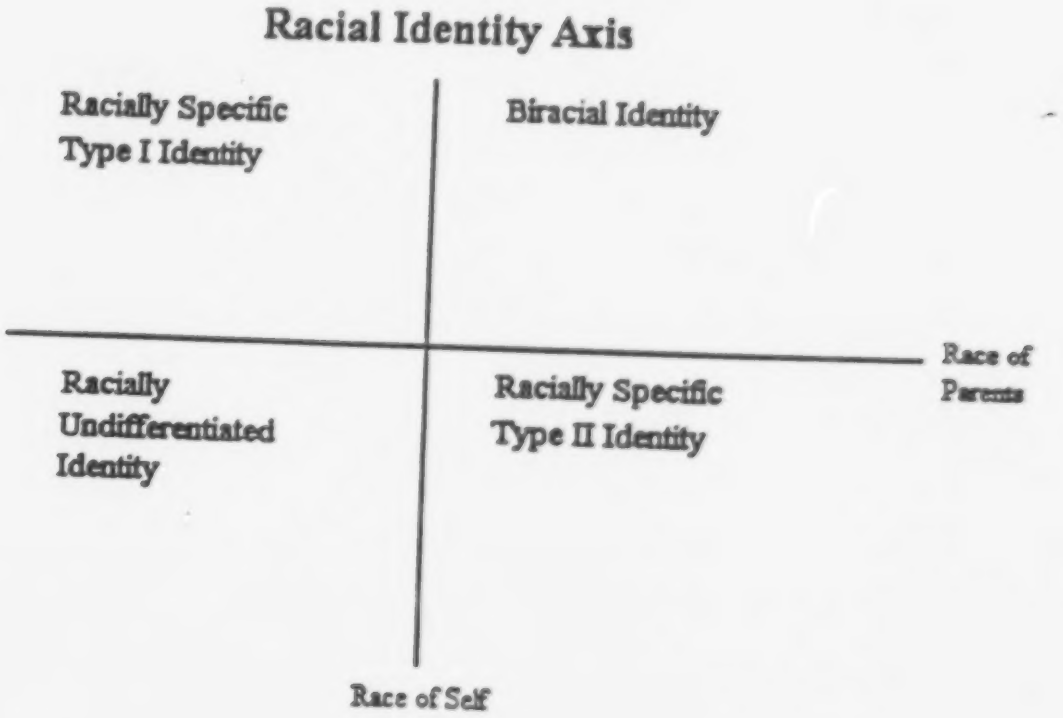

Figure 3. The Cultural-Racial Identity Model

Culturally Specific Type I Identity		Bicultural Identity	
Racially Specific Type I Identity	Biracial Identity	Racially Specific Type I Identity	Biracial Identity
Racially Undifferentiated Identity	Racially Specific Type II Identity	Racially Undifferentiated Identity	Racially Specific Type II Identity
Culturally Undifferentiated Identity		**Culturally Specific Type II Identity**	
Racially Specific Type I Identity	Biracial Identity	Racially Specific Type I Identity	Biracial Identity
Racially Undifferentiated Identity	Racially Specific Type II Identity	Racially Undifferentiated Identity	Racially Specific Type II Identity